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ABSTRACT

In presenting courses to students, teachers should acknowledge opposition to their educational choices. Discussions of the bases and possible consequences of choices may--and should--lead students to ask for more freedom and more options. Students understand that teachers must evaluate them, so if teachers offer as much leeway as they can, students will try to be as fair as their teachers are. The teaching of controversies recognizes existing conflicts and avoids pretending a unity that does not exist. In writing-about-literature courses, teachers can explain why particular readings are chosen, where they fit, what the teachers' biases are, and what opposition to the teachers' methods exist. Acknowledgement of others' truths is a step toward becoming a teacher. This implies options in ways of thinking, which is at the core of educational goals. Allowing beliefs to shape teachings, without admitting to questions about those positions, gives rise to a monologue posing as a dialogue. (SG)

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Teaching the Controversies: the Other Within the Classroom

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Teaching the Controversies: the Other Within the Classroom

Last spring, in the CMSU faculty lounge, I found the following note scribbled on a yellow legal pad and obviously left for responses, at least mental ones:

> According to one of the Stanford U. English profs on the Aug. 28, McNeal Laher [sic] Report, The Stanford English Department is to
>
> SEEK THE TRUTH IN LITERATURE
>
> What does this mean?
>
> Whose truth?
>
> When is it true?

The note intrigued me by its form of course, but even more because the quest for <u>truth</u>--always a goal of humans--has become overtly central to educators. I recalled Winifred Horner stating in an address at the University of Arizona that we composition teachers should teach the truth; her remark was met with the nodding of heads, but later was questioned in much the same form as the above note. In a later address to the same group, Patricia Bizzell stated that since we educators no longer know what truth is, the best we teachers can do is take a stand and act on it. She, for example, would openly acknowledge her stance as a feminist and as openly teach from her beliefs. Her

statement, too, met with general assent, but again was questioned in the more casual atmosphere of a reception.

Teaching the truth, I suspect, is something we all want to do, but we're as stymied about what that means in concrete practice as was the writer of the note. One way, of course, is to be honest about what we do and don't know. James Raymond, in "Desire and the Teaching of English," suggests something akin to this form of honesty:

> There is no ideal theory to guide us, no infallible method. The best we can do is to try to recognize that whatever method we follow is founded on a theory that is inevitably partial, in both senses of the word, and to identify the circumstances in which one method or another might be useful despite its partiality. (29)

Maybe we should be even more truthful. Why acknowledge only the <u>possibility</u> that what we do may not be effective in all situations? Why not give the students all we know that might help them make decisions for themselves--even if one of their decisions is that they do not agree with us and resist our methods and choices? After all, they are the ones who stand to lose and gain by what we choose for them. Even if we, on principle or under administration, must enforce a method or goal, the least we can allow our involuntary draftees is the truth about what we're doing and why. Rather than suggesting just the controversy outside, let's acknowledge the controversies within. In short, let's do the following as much as our principles and

our situation allow: acknowledge and explain any opposition to our choices within the classroom; explain what the costs might be to the student, both within and outside the walls of academia; and allow students options, at least the option to know their disagreements with us may have some basis.

The following example of teaching the controveries within the classroom comes from one class at a community college, but it reflects the kind of explanations and options that can (and should) accompany other classroom choices, some of which are discussed later herein. In this class, I distributed a copy of an article by Alice-Leone Moats, in which she ridicules the The New York Times for "getting almost as careless about keeping its literacy and cultural pantalets up as newspapers that are far less reputable." The Times had allowed a reference to Julius Caesar as an "emperor." Moats asks "was there no copy editor on hand to leap out of his chair at the sight of the word 'emperor'?" She objects to a current tendency for "correct pronunciation and correct grammar . . . to be abhorred as elitist," and states "Incidentally, what is wrong with belonging to the elite? The first definition in the dictionary for elite is 'the choice or select part.'" She brings Hirsch, Kenen, Kett and Trefil into her sights, too, claiming that they have been "infected" with the "fear of seeming elitist and passe," a fear that "obviously dictated . . . the choice of entries in the literature and English section" of the Dictionary of Cultural Literacy (A 15, Cols. 1-2). (I wonder if Ms. Moats saw the irony

in her turning to a dictionary to support her definition and to define her status?)

With an elite audience self-defined--and vividly so--the students were able to place themselves in a controversy crucial to them and in which they are already involved. One student said he had bought the dictionary, but was disappointed that the authors gave so little information about each item; he wanted more than an empty reference. This young man, contrary to our occasional notions that our students don't think about literacy, had already taken his stance; his complaint against the dictionary was one being lodged by many professionals in education. The class then discussed the possible benefit and dangers of the theory underlying the work while I added what I knew: Robert Pattison's belief that those people privy to these cultural-literacy terms, and privy to all the conventions of academic language, are those who are admitted to the "best" schools, and who subsequently attain the power positions, and thus keep established the social and economic status quo; Carol Reed's belief that blacks, at least, want access to this power structure; and Shaugnessy's stance that "the person who does not control the dominant code of literacy . . . is likely to be pitched against more obstacles than are apparent to those who have mastered that code" (13). We talked about changing the social structure by changing our language.

The Moats article also led, as it should, to my explaining and defending anew the bases underlying some of my choices that

semester: that while I believe the language must change, I teach academic language as a dialect, and that a possible ultimate result of my choice might be that academic language will continue to dominate, and I and my students will have helped perpetuate a division we don't believe should exist--we would keep reelecting an "elite" such as Miss Moats because we wouldn't take a stand against her. In other words, my classroom practice wasn't based on my belief of what should be, but on what is. We talked about the movement in our nation to Americanize the language, to accept what is done as what is correct--we, for instance, no longer insist that a sentence cannot end with a preposition, or that an infinitive cannot be separated. Apostrophes may soon disappear from words such as "don't" (White n.p.), just as the hyphen disappeared from "to-day" and "to-morrow," and just as the space disappeared in "forever" (which saddened and apparently irritated Cornell's Lane Cooper) (51). Most important, we discussed the students' options: to use a new form by choice, because they believe the language should change; or to learn the old form because they believe it to be correct and that a correct form should dominate.

Such discussions of the bases and possible consequences of our choices may--and should--lead students to ask for more freedom, more options, but neither the discussions nor the options leads to anarchy, as one colleague who read this article predicted. He wondered if students might not become Bartlebys, saying "I prefer not." He also wondered how we could pretend to

allow students choices if we would evaluate the students in the long run, thus actually giving them no choice but to do as we prefer. While both of these are worthy of our concern, neither seems actually to be a problem. For one thing, sharing our biases and the possible effects of our teaching doesn't mean we toss our responsibility up for the students to grab. We share what we can as far as we can. Most students, as most teachers know, want to learn and they appreciate efforts to be honest and fair. They attempt to match the teacher's goals with their own. The attached grading scales, for example, were submitted by students after I explained which assignments I needed to grade, and which I felt should count the most. We have to evaluate our students, they know that, and if we offer them as much leeway as possible, they will try to be as fair as we are.

Ten years of teaching have shown me that the students' choices are almost always moderate. One student who resisted the idea that numbers over ten should be written out, advised me that he would use figures throughout his paper, even at the beginning of the sentence. Personally, I find that unappealing because of appearance, but he had made a choice. I warned him, though, that the next instructor might not allow it, and the student's grade might suffer. He had a right to know that, too. Other students have deliberately chosen to avoid the neutral "they" and to use instead mixed references to "he" and "she." One student, after the class had discussed the pros and cons of peer workshops, came to me after class and explained that he couldn't bear for other

students to read his essays. He didn't mind attending group conferences and responding to his peers' work, but he wanted no one to say a word about his writing: other people's comments "steered" him "wrong," confused him. He suggested--with no prompting--that I deduct some points from his grade. I wonder would he have come forward without the discussion, or if he would have been one of those students who forget their conference, or leave their essay at home, or come up with a fanciful excuse that at least entertains the teacher though it leaves the student still missing part of the assigned work.

We have considerable support for bringing the controversies into the classroom. Everything we do in class reflects our bias, as Freire pointed out twenty years ago in "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom," and as educators such as Bizzell and Sledd have more recently reminded us (141-143; 168-176). We can't create an outside "other" separate from us and our teaching. We are part of that "other." We teach controversies all the time anyway, although usually at some distance from our own discipline. We examine, and expect our students to examine, beliefs about justice, mercy, democracy, socialism, racism, sexism. Equally important now, and particularly in the classroom, is the examination of beliefs about "elitism," "pluralism," "cultural literacy," "social literacy," "functional literacy," "academic literacy," "canon," "marginality," "oral literacy," and "dialect." We shouldn't avoid such terms and the beliefs and controversies they

represent. Ed White says that "teaching is individualizing. We ask them to think for themselves, and this often results in discussion of sex, politics, religion . . . ." (n.p.). We can as easily let our students think for themselves about what we, and consequently they, do. Surely we can't pretend that what we do falls outside the context of the rest of the world.

Too, we can't pretend a unity that simply doesn't exist. Even the most prominent and respected educators have never come to consensus on content and methods. While Quintilian was supporting linear, thoughtful writing, a rhetorician around the corner was teaching "rapid writing" (Book X, III2-5, Butler 93). Erasmus created diatribes against academic writing popular in his time (Thompson 435). Using models has been questioned at least as far back as Aristotle, who opposed the practice since it might deter a student from finding the truth (Brubacher 178). Arguments over <u>which</u> models have at least as long a history--Quintilian proposed simple models (Book II, V, Murphy 110)--and are certainly occurring now: Who are these writers that Ong and Murray and others would have young writers read? What audience and language do they foster? And process writing, the dominant method in our newer texts, certainly furrows some brows. Conscientious educators remind us that the product appears somewhere (Horner n.p., Boice 213), that the process changes with the writer, and that sometimes revision simply isn't needed (Murray 73). Even freewriting, the current rage, the child of writing-as-process, isn't embraced by every educator.

Bartholomae says such techniques as journal keeping and freewriting aren't the answer for students attempting to acquire academic discourse (140-146). And some writers get apprehensive when asked to write in a way that reveals self (Daly 58), which freewriting assignments often require the student to do.

Acknowledging and dealing with such opposition to our methods isn't difficult, though it requires a sophisticated awareness by teachers of the controversies attending their choices, a willingness to discuss where classroom methods lie in those controversies, and an understanding of what those methods might lead to. When we define or explain the standards of a class or an institution, when we negotiate assignments or grading standards, when we define audience awareness, we can do so by placing the class or institution within the controversy. If, for example, the standards established by the English Department are those of twenty years ago, and the textbook of the course one still based on the current-traditional paradigm, we can say so. If we are breaking with those standards within a particular class, but the students may face those standards in a later class, under another instructor, we can also explain that. Two English departments in my most recent experience are battling over the use of Kennedy's Literature as the text for the second-semester Freshman English course. They argue over a long-standing practice: the study of literature as a method of teaching writing. Students in those institutions should know about that battle and in which general camp, anonymous if

necessary, their teacher stands. Is the Kennedy text being used in their course? Why? What will they stand to gain and lose by the method chosen? It wouldn't hurt them to know, either, that the battle over literature as an aid to teaching composition began the moment teaching composition began. The students needn't worry about choosing the right or wrong side; they just need to know their side.

In these writing-about-literature classes (still commonly the second semester in the Freshman-English sequence), we can also explain why we've chosen particular readings, where they fit within or without the canon, what biases we have and what opposition we face. Or we can ask the students to determine the answers to those questions, which is perhaps a more honest approach--sometimes a student's question is remarkably similar to one raised within our discipline, such as why the Kennedy text? why Tolstoi and not Bradbury? Surely students, if anyone, should know what canon means, and what it includes at a particular institution. (In a short quiz in my last Freshman English class, a student defined canon as an early-American weapon. His answer is ironically correct.) Bizzell might explain the opposition to some feminist interpretations. I could defend teaching Kesey's Cuckoo instead of Melville's Moby Dick. By being honest about why we choose what we do, and what it may cost the student, we allow the students some options--at the very least to disagree with us and to know that their disagreement has support, that they, too, have a camp. Students might wonder if The Awakening

joined the canon only because of the gender of the author, and if that is a valid criterion. Their discussion about literature becomes a discussion about literacy, too, their own literacy.

By teaching the controversies we bring into the classroom, we at least are striving for an approach that acknowledges the rights of the persons most affected by our decisions. We have world views that come from our experiences and that guide our choices, and we probably tend, as James Raymond says, to "confuse our world view as a view of the world as it actually is." He says, too, that "there is in all of us the mentality of the Conquistadors, the assurance that, at least in certain matters, we possess not a a truth, but the truth . . . " (32). Open acknowledgement of others' truths is a step in rising above the limited mentality of a would-be conqueror and in becoming a teacher. We do not have to teach that a power language or dialect or set of dialects does or does not exist; or that we should or should not have a standard language, a national curriculum or a canon. We teach the questions; the students find their own answers. By admitting what we are doing, we imply options, and having options in ways of thinking is at the very core of our educational goal. Certainly neither Piaget nor Vygotsky would disagree that human beings learn through relationships, and the more relationships they have, the more they can learn. If we let what we believe to be the truth shape what we teach, without admitting to the questions about our own stance, we are denying

the dialectic that allows people to place themselves within their society. We are engaged in a monolog that poses as a dialog.

The content of a composition class has always been a matter of dispute, and very likely always will be. We may tend now to cling to our credo writing is process and feel that in shedding the current-traditional methods we have come to a consensus, but we haven't. Theories and consequent methods have always vied for dominance in the classroom. We've been in a similar battle all along, only the complexities of who wins, and what, have changed, have become more part of our knowledge and thus our motives. Mina Shaugnessy once said that we should teach not only what we know, but also what we do not. We mustn't forget the first part of that advice: we know the risks posed by our choices in the classroom. Those we must share, too.

Student Suggestions for Point Value of Assignments

1. Short Report	2. Expanded Report	3. In-class essay,	4. Revision	5. In-class	6. Post-test (departmental)	7. Final	8. Homework Participation
20	30	20	5	15	10	0	0
5	15	5	15	15	10	25	10
5	35	10	15	15	10	0	10
0	35	0	20	20	10	5	10
5	35	10	15	15	10	0	10
15	40	0	30	10	0	0	5
10	40	0	20	10	10	0	10
15	35	0	15	15	10	10	10 (as bonus)
10	20	0	10	10	10	0	40
15	40	0	15	10	10	10	0
0	30	0	20	20	10	20	0
5	35	0	15	10	10	10	15
10	30	10	15	0	10	15	10
0	25	0	15	15	10	15	20
10	15	10	15	10	10	20	10
10	20	10	10	10	10	20	10
10	35	10	10	10	10	10	5

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